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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the decision-making process leading to school district approval for staff development. A retrospective field study approach was used to investigate the decision of a small, rural school district in eastern Washington (enrollment 2,200) to adopt a comprehensive English composition teaching program throughout the curriculum. This case was chosen because the program scope required community-wide participation. Interviews with superintendents, principals, teachers, and others were conducted, and several relevant district documents were examined. Data were analyzed according to J. G. March and J. P. Olsen's "garbage can" model of decision making, defined as a series of choice opportunities in which a given project is one of several competing solutions addressing numerous problems. Two implications may be drawn: (1) the "garbage can" model was definitely applicable to the decision-making process in a small, rural school district; and (2) results may help educators anticipate conditions under which staff development programs may be approved in similar settings. The interplay of March and Olsen's theoretical "streams" (choice opportunities, participants, problems, and solutions) may encourage other staff development advocates to initiate similar processes. (MLH)

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SCHOOL DISTRICT APPROVAL FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT: "GARBAGE CAN" DECISION-MAKING

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SCHOOL DISTRICT APPROVAL FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT: "GARBAGE CAN" DECISION-MAKING

Introduction

Staff development in education may be defined as the provision of professional growth opportunities for inservice teachers. Educators recognize its importance as a school district activity and its significance has been discussed at length in the literature (Bishop, 1976; Harris, 1980; Hite and Howey, 1977; Rubin, 1975; Santelli, 1978; Wilson, 1978). Reasons given for supporting staff development fall into four main categories:

(1) The teaching force has become more stable due to declining enrollments and tight economic resources. While experienced teachers hold on to their jobs longer, fewer new teachers with up-to-date training are entering the field. Thus, there is a greater need for staff development to keep inservice teachers abreast of current developments in educational theory and methodology (Santelli, 1978).

(2) Society is undergoing rapid social, economic, and technological changes. Even if the teaching force had not become more stable, teachers would need continuing education to keep up with these changes (Hite and Howey, 1977; Wilson, 1978).

(3) Preservice training alone cannot produce good teachers. Teaching is a complex business, considered by some to be an art. Teachers need continuing professional growth

opportunities while on the job to master the art of teaching (Harris, 1980; Rubin, 1975).

(4) Teachers want staff development programs. As they have gained in collective bargaining power, they have tended to include provisions for staff development in their negotiated contracts (Hite and Howey, 1977; Santelli, 1978).

However, school district approval of funding for staff development programs can be problematic. Three reasons for this are apparent in the literature. First, there is little agreement as to who should provide the necessary funds (Collins, 1978). Second, school districts are facing financial stress as funding sources for all aspects of education are reduced, so staff development must compete with other aspects of education for funds just as education in general must compete with other community services (Santelli, 1978). Third, it is difficult to determine accurately the costs of staff development programs (Inservice Education and Training of Teachers, 1982; Moore and Hyde, 1980).

Given that staff development is a valuable school district activity, but that funding is problematic, it is important for educators to be aware of the conditions under which staff development programs are likely to be approved. However, while research has been done on planning and implementing effective staff development programs, and much has been written on this subject (for example, Bishop, 1976

and Griffin, 1983), little or no research has been done on securing school district commitment for such programs.

The Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making process that leads to school district approval for staff development. More specifically, the researcher wished to analyze an appropriate case study of such a decision-making process to determine the conditions under which a staff development program is likely to be approved.

The subject of the investigation was a small, rural city school district in Eastern Washington State with a student enrollment of 2,200. In 1982 this district made a major commitment to staff development by adopting a large-scale, long-range, program to promote the teaching of composition throughout the curriculum. While expenditures for staff development in previous years had been minimal, the school board approved over $45,000 for the first three years of the program, with the intention that every teacher in the district would eventually participate. The scope of the program necessitated the participation of various segments of the community in a decision-making process. The researcher therefore expected that this case would be appropriate for the pruposes of the study.

The staff development program will be referred to in this paper as "the writing project" and the school district as "Eastville."

Method

In keeping with the purposes of the study, a retrospective field studies approach was used. Data were obtained through interviews with various participants in the decision-making process and by an examination of relevant documents.

The researcher first interviewed the person who was superintendent at the time of the decision. Based on data from this initial interview, other major participants were identified and susequently interviewed. These persons included a community member who was on the school board at the time of the decision, two school principals who were actively involved, the then chairperson of the high school English department, and a university professor who originated the writing project. Interviews were informal and ranged from forty minutes to two hours in length.

The researcher used the following questions as a guide to structuring the interviews:

(1) How and why did the writing project get started in Eastville school district?

(2) What was the sequence of events that lead to its approval?

(3) What was your involvement in the writing project?

(4) Who else was an important participant?

All persons interviewed appeared to be cooperative and helpful though they all expressed concern about the accuracy of their recollections as to dates and chronology of events. The researcher recorded responses in writing as verbatim as possible. These responses were later analyzed and compared to determine an approximate chronology of decision-making events and factors which influenced the process.

The following school district documents were examined:

(1) "Citizens Committee Final Report: Recommended Goals for the Eastville School District, February, 1978." This report includes results of a community survey on school district needs and recommendations for long-range goals.

(2) Minutes of school board meetings, March, 1978, to November, 1982. The minutes reflect the formal process of prioritizing school district goals and the approval of funding for staff development in general and for the writing project in particular.

(3) "Goals, Objectives and Action Plans" (June, 1979). This document states the priortized school district goals and estimates the costs of related action plans.

(4) Documents specific to the writing project: original project proposal, program philosophy, and miscellaneous memoranda.

The researcher analyzed the data from the documents to verify and correct the recollections of the interviewees and to identify official district actions which fit into the chronology of events leading to writing project approval.

This method was used to develop as valid and complete a picture as possible of the decision process. The documents provided an objective framework and accurate data as to dates and finances; the recollections of participants filled in the framework with perceptions as to needs, goals, and motivations of persons who influenced and guided the process.

The analyzed data are presented in the following section as a chronological narrative of the decision-making process.

Narrative

In December, 1976, Eastville's superintendent appointed a "Citizens Committee" to examine the school district's needs and make recommendations for long-range goals. The Committee consisted of both community members and "school people." Committee members learned as much as possible about Eastville's schools and about goal setting in other districts, culminating their efforts by surveying the following groups: a random sample of voters; parents of all school children; a random sample of students in grades five through eleven; all high school seniors; all certificated staff; and the Citizens Committee members themselves.

The survey determined the perceptions of each of these groups as to areas of need within the schools. For example, a list of curriculum areas such as mathematics, language arts, and social studies followed the items, "Please indicate whether each area should be given MORE, THE SAME AS, or LESS emphasis than you think is now provided," and "Which of the following areas, if any, is it most important to give more emphasis in the Eastville schools?"

The Committee submitted its findings and recommendations to the school board in the form of a final report in February, 1978. This report conveyed a clear message, reflected both in the survey data and the goal recommendations, that the community perceived language arts in general and writing skills in particular as the areas most in need of improvement. Specifically, "Report and Technical Writing" outscored any other item as needing more emphasis. Thus the Committee gave high priority to the goal, "Develop stronger skills in written English by teaching more report and technical writing in [grades] K - 12," and verbally reiterated to the board that this particular goal was the most important.

Following the report of the Citizen's Committee, the superintendent worked with other administrators to develop a document entitled "Goals, Objectives and Action Plans." This document incorporated both the Citizens Committee recommendations and informal input from school district personnel. Since the document included specific action plans

and cost estimates for each goal, its development took over a year.

In March, 1979, the board began to prioritize the goals in the "Goals, Objectives and Action Plans" document. During this process numerous comments were made at school board meetings by interested citizens and among the board members themselves regarding the importance of improving writing skills. The board adopted the "Goals" document in June, 1979, with writing skills incorporated in Goal 1-A, suggesting top priority. The accompanying action plan was to "Improve integrating of writing skills with total K-12 language arts program." At the time of adoption, the superintendent commented that the goals would provide guidelines for the administration as to "how priorities are set for money and time spent."

During the following school year, 1979-1980, the superintendent promoted the idea of a full-scale staff development program to address the actions plans in the "Goals..." document, including the action plan relating to writing skills. Simultaneously, the board and the teachers' association were involved in tense negotiations over salaries. At least one board member thought that increased district commitment to staff development would help ease board-teacher conflict. When the superintendent came to the board in June, 1980, to request authorization "to develop a comprehensive inservice program for the instructional staff," there was

little debate. The board approved the request, appropriating funds for staff development in the 1980-81 budget, with a stipulated ceiling of $20,000. The superintendent was directed to submit specific plans for use of the money to the board.

Within a month of the board's approval of staff development money, Eastville's curriculum director recommended using the funds to hire a three-quarter time "ITIP" trainer for the coming school year. ITIP (Integrating Theory into Practice) was gaining popularity at the time as an effective teaching approach and had been officially adopted by some school districts in the state. However, the board expressed reluctance to use the money for that purpose, questioning whether teachers were truly in need of such training. Discussion on the proposal was tabled and never resurrected. The curriculum director was directed to come back to the board with proprosals that did not involve hiring a consultant.

The superintendent then made a first effort to develop a staff development program that would address the writing skills action plan. He granted a sabbatical to the chairperson of the high school English department for the 1980-81 school year, along with a mini-grant to study composition at the University of Illinois. This chairperson had been involved for the previous two years in revamping the high school English curriculum to include more teaching of writing. The superintendent expected that the chairperson's

sabbatical experiences would serve as a basis for development of a staff development program. However, in the words of the superintendent, this effort "came to nothing" and "more needed to be done."

From the chairperson's viewpoint, during the sabbatical year the superintendent and other personnel became interested in a different approach to writing development in the district. The chairperson returned from the sabbatical to find that "money and focus" had shifted away from the chairperson's efforts to the new approach.

Interest in this new approach was generated by the faculty of one elementary school. This faculty was working with a local university professor who had developed a writing skills approach based loosely on the National Writing Project which had originated in San Francisco. The professor was volunteering time on a monthly basis to work with the school's faculty to develop their awareness of the writing process. This faculty began to push for a district-wide program based on the professor's methods.

At the same time, the well-liked principal of the same school became seriously ill. The new, acting principal thought that a writing project originating from their school would go far to alleviate morale problems caused by the illness. The acting principal and the professor went to the superintendent with their proposal for a district-wide program. The superintendent was very supportive because

initiative for the project was originating within the school district. Presumably, the program would be well accepted by district personnel since many teachers were already familiar with the professor's methods.

The professor formalized his ideas into a proposal in June, 1982, for the first two years of a long-range writing development program. According to the proposal, during the initial year of the project a "cadre" of teachers from two buildings would be trained both in the writing process and in teaching writing throughout the curriculum. During the second and any subsequently funded years, this group of teachers would provide similar training to all teachers in the district.

The superintendent submitted the professor's proposal to the board in July, 1982, with a strong recommendation that it be accepted. Following favorable discussion, the board gave the project verbal approval. The superintendent then appointed a building principal as project manager. Meanwhile, the professor, who was to serve as project facilitator, unexpectedly accepted an administrative position in another location and recommended a replacement for himself. This caused some last minute replanning and increased the projected costs to the district. Nevertheless, the superintendent decided to hire the replacement, and the project was successfully implemented in the Fall of 1982. Apparently, the participants perceived the potential benefits to the district

as outweighing any problems caused by the loss of a key person.

Analytic Model

March and Olsen (1976) contend that educational organizations operate under conditions of "ambiguity" (p. 12). By ambiguity they mean that certain aspects of organizational life cannot be clearly defined: educational goals are broad and imprecise; educational technology is neither reliable nor completely replicable; attentional structures that determine how educators spend their time are loose; and organizational history is subject to individual interpretation. March and Olsen argue that under such conditions rational-analytical models are inadequate representations of the decision-making process.

Rather, March and Olsen describe decision-making situations in educational organizations as "garbage cans" into which participants dump "various problems and solutions" (p. 26). They contend that decisions are based more in the accidental meetings of such solutions and problems than in a rational process. Thus, they conceptualize four "streams" which co-mingle in the garbage can to produce decisions:

1. <u>Choice opportunities.</u> Choice opportunities are the decision points in organizational life. They may be routine and cyclical, for example, school boards approving yearly

budgets. Or they may be extraordinary, such as deciding to close a building due to declining enrollment. Choice opportunities may be created by participants if there is a backlog of available problems and solutions.

2. Problems. Problems are the concerns that people bring with them to choice opportunities. These concerns can be personal or organizational. For example, a particular problem may relate more to personal frustration on the job than to organizational factors. Problems may or may not be relevant to the particular choice situation in which they are aired.

3. Solutions. Solutions are realistic alternative actions that can be taken by the organization. They are answers looking for questions. For example, purchasing a word processing system may be a good solution for one or more organizational problems. However, such an available solution may or may not hook up with an appropriate problem within a given choice situation.

4. Participants. Participants are the people who are active in a choice situation. Participants have other demands on their time and may not give as much attention to a particular choice as would be expected. Participants tend to enter choice situations where their "problems" can be aired and their "solutions" may be adopted.

Kreiner, Christensen, Olsen, March and Romelaer and others (in March and Olsen, 1976) have demonstrated the

utility of the garbage can model in analyzing decision-making processes in several settings, including American and European universities, European private schools, and a large, urban public school district.

Analysis

The "garbage can" model is a useful theoretical base for analyzing the data obtained in this study. The described decision process can be viewed as a series of choice opportunities to which a variety of participants, problems, and solutions were attached.

Using March and Olsen's four "streams" as a model, the following arrays of elements relevant to the writing project can be isolated from the data:

Choice Opportunities

February, 1978 -Formulation of Citizens Committee recommendations
June, 1979-Adoption of "Goals, Objectives and Action Plans" by the school board
June, 1980-Approval of 1980-81 budget including money for staff development
July, 1980-July, 1982-Allocation of staff development funds

Participants

Board members
Administrators
Other school personnel
Outsiders (Citizens Committee members, the professor)

Problems

Poor student writing skills
Board-teacher conflict over salary negotiations
Low morale in one school building due to principal's illness

Solutions

Funding for staff development
English department chairperson's sabbatical
Hiring ITIP trainer
Writing project

The following discussion addresses the interaction of these elements within the context of each choice oportunity.

February, 1978 - Formulation of Citizens Committee recommendations. Major participants in the Citizens Committee that formulated recommendations for school district goals were outsiders, in this case community members appointed by the superintendent. Presumably, these people participated voluntarily and were willing to give the necessary attention to the decision. These participants had to choose recommended goals for the district from a myriad of concerns and ideas expressed by citizens and school personnel. In this sense, the choice opportunity involved prioritizing available problems without attempting to find solutions. The problem that came to the fore was weak writing skills among students, as emphasized in the community survey. The Committee decided to make writing skill improvement the first goal priority.

June, 1979 - Adoption of "Goals, Objectives, and Action Plans" by the school board. As with the Citizens Committee, the second choice situation, the adoption of goals by the school board, involved the prioritizing of perceived needs or problems. Both admninistrators and board members gave their attention to the decision; however, the fact that the process took over a year indicates that this attention was sporadic.

Echoing its appearance in the previous choice opportunity, the problem of poor writing skills dominated all others and was incorporated as a top priority in the final "Goals" document. Solutions did not seem to play a part in this choice opportunity.

June, 1980 - Approval of 1980-81 budget including money for staff development. The superintendent and the board participated equally in the decision to approve the 1980-81 budget with the included staff development allocation. Both parties had to direct their attention to budget planning for the coming year. So, where the specific request for staff development funding was unusual, the choice opportunity itself was routine.

Apparently, the superintendent and the board viewed full-scale staff development as a possible solution to many problems, including the problem of poor student writing skills. In addition, at least one board member viewed staff development as a potential solution to another problem,

conflict between the board and teachers over salaries. This board member felt that the increased commitment to staff development would help alleviate the conflict.

July, 1980-July, 1982 - Allocation of staff development funds. The administrators were the dominant participants in the decision to allocate staff development funds to a specific program. Since the board had not stipulated how the approved funds should be used, the superintendent was to take the initiative in developing appropriate staff development plans. However, it was understood that proposals should be cleared by the board before being adopted. Other school personnel and the professor, an outsider, were secondary participants in that the professor originated one of the available solutions and the other school personnel were influential in its adoption.

Three problems became attached to this choice opportunity. The first was the persistent writing skills problem which had already appeared in three previous choice opportunities. The second was the morale problem at one of the elementary schools due to the serious illness of the principal, and the third was the continuing board-teacher conflict over salary negotiations.

Three potential solutions also came to the surface . The first was the curriculum director's proposal to hire an ITIP trainer. However, this proposal seems to have been a solution without a problem. Though it reflected a popular current

trend in education, it was not understood by the board as addressing specific needs in Eastville. Thus, the proposal was dropped and a decision was not made at the time.

The second solution, the English department chairperson's sabbatical, was an attempt to identify or develop an appropriate staff development program. Though originally seen by the superintendent as addressing the writing skills problem, this solution was abandoned before its results could be implemented. As the chairperson stated, "money and focus" were shifted to a new proposal.

Finally, the writing project appeared as the third potential solution. Advocated by administrators, other school personnel and the professor, it was the solution of choice for several apparent reasons. First, it directly addressed the widely recognized and persistent problem of weak writing skills among students. This problem had been recycling through choice opportunities for the past four years. Second, the writing project had the potential to address the other available problems, low morale at one of the schools and board-teacher conflict. Third, the proposed project was a confortable solution in that it had already won the backing of school personnel who knew and accepted the professor and his methods. Thus, the proposed staff development program was perceived by several participants as a comfortable solution to multiple problems. The participants made an uncontroversial

decision to allocate staff development funds to the writing project.

This interaction of participants, problems, and solutions within the four choice opportunities is more graphically illustrated in Figure 1.

CHOICE OPPORTUNITY - FEBRUARY, 1978
FORMULATION OF CITIZENS COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

PARTICIPANT-OUTSIDERS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	(None)

CHOICE OPPORTUNITY - JUNE, 1979
ADOPTION OF "GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTION PLANS" BY THE SCHOOL BOARD

PARTICIPANT-BOARD MEMBERS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	(None)

PARTICIPANT-ADMINISTRATORS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	(None)

CHOICE OPPORTUNITY - JUNE, 1980
APPROVAL OF 1980-81 BUDGET

PARTICIPANT-BOARD MEMBERS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	Funding for staff development
Board-teacher conflict	

PARTICIPANT-ADMINISTRATORS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	Funding for staff development

CHOICE OPPORTUNITY - JULY, 1980-JULY, 1982
ALLOCATION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

PARTICIPANT-BOARD MEMBERS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	Writing project
Board-teacher conflict	

PARTICIPANT-ADMINISTRATORS

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	Sabbatical
	ITIP trainer
	Writing project

PARTICIPANT-OTHER SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	Writing project
Low morale at one school	

PARTICIPANT-OUTSIDER (THE PROFESSOR)

Problems	Solutions
Poor writing skills	Writing project

Figure 1. Interaction of participants, problems and solutions within each choice opportunity.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the conditions under which a staff development program is likely to be approved. Eastville's approval of the allocation of staff development funds to the writing project was analyzed according to March and Olsen's "garbage can" model of decision-making. Using this model, the approval process could be viewed as a series of choice opportunities in which the writing project was one of several competing solutions with the potential to address one or more problems. The data seem to indicate that the writing project was approved over other available solutions because (a) it was perceived as addressing multiple problems within the school district; (b) it was viewed as a comfortable solution, one that would be widely accepted by school personnel; and (c) it was advocated by several participants within the context of an appropriate choice opportunity.

Two implications may be drawn from the results of this study. First, on a theoretical level, the results lend support to March and Olsen's "garbage can" model of decision-making as applied to educational organizations. Where previous research has demonstrated the utility of the model in several other educational settings, this study points up its applicability to decision-making in the setting of a small, rural school district. The model "fits" the data of

this study in an intuitively satisfying way. Further, the model provides a neat explanation for the long delay in addressing the writing skills problem: the problem could not be solved until the confluence of the four streams--participants, problems, solutions, and choice opportunities--allowed a decision to be made.

Second, on a more practical level, the results may hlep educators anticipate the conditions under which staff development programs are likely to be approved in small, rural school districts. Specifically, educators interested in promoting a staff development program may ask the following questions: (a) Will decision makers view the program as addressing recognized, possibly persistent, needs within the district? (b) Will the program be considered as a well-accepted, comfortable "solution" to these problems? (c) Is it the right time to propose the program, that is, are enough participants who advocate the program as a solution to these problems involved in an appropriate choice oppotunity?

By considering the interplay of March and Olsen's four theoretical "streams" within their own school settings, staff development advocates may be able to favorably influence the decision-making process.

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